

# Group pushes for more help for those in poverty

By MIKE DENNISON - IR State Bureau - 06/07/07

HELENA — As Congress draws up a budget this year, it should expand programs that help Montana's low-income citizens, such as the Children's Health Insurance Program and the earned income tax credit, a coalition of advocates for the poor said Wednesday.

Coalition members also urged Montana's congressional delegation to get behind the program expansions, which they said would bring "millions of dollars into the Montana economy."

"We believe that health care is a human right and should not be based on the ability to pay, but based on human need," said Rep. Mary Caferro, D-Helena.

Caferro and others said programs that help the poor, the elderly and working families have been hit by federal budget cuts in recent years, and that the Democrat-controlled Congress is starting to reverse that trend.

When asked why these or any programs should be expanded in the face of multibillion-dollar federal deficits, Terry Kendrick of The Policy Institute in Helena said it's "a matter of budget priorities."

"It seems to me the people who are in poverty usually get the money last," she said. "These are programs that help lift people out of poverty."

Groups in the coalition include Working for Equality and Economic Liberation and Montana Women Vote, a project to encourage lower-income women to participate in the political process. Its supporters include the YWCAs of Montana, Planned Parenthood and the Blue Mountain Clinic in Missoula.

Those advocating for the programs won't get much argument from Montana's congressional delegation.

U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., says more funding nationwide for the Children's Health Insurance Program, known as CHIP, is his top health-care priority, and is proposing a \$50 billion increase over 10 years.

Barrett Kaiser, Baucus's press secretary, said Wednesday that Baucus is working on a bill to accomplish the CHIP expansion.

Baucus also met Saturday in Helena with members of the coalition that spoke Wednesday, to discuss the other programs.

"Everything is on the table at this point," Kaiser said.

A spokesman for U.S. Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont., said Wednesday the congressman supports expanding CHIP and the earned income tax credit, and making the child tax credit permanent.

However, Bridger Pierce said Rehberg believes efforts first should be made to ensure that those currently eligible for the earned income tax credit are using it.

U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., said during his 2006 campaign he thinks CHIP should eventually be expanded to cover all children.

The earned income tax credit is a federal income-tax credit targeted at the poorest taxpayers. The coalition wants to expand the eligibility for adults without children.

The coalition also wants to lower the income level at which people are eligible for the child tax credit, so it will be available to more people below the poverty level.

While Democrats in Congress appear poised to approve more money for CHIP, the state may not be able to take full advantage of the increase, Caferro said.

States can't spend federal CHIP money unless they match it with state money, determined by where they set the eligibility cutoff.

The 2007 Montana Legislature increased the family income eligibility cutoff for CHIP from 150 percent of the federal poverty level up to 175 percent, starting July 1, but declined to increase it to 200 percent.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer, a Democrat, did not support expansion up to 200 percent. Caferro introduced a bill to increase the eligibility to 200 percent, but it was killed by the Republican-controlled House Appropriations Committee.

"I'm just disappointed that we didn't do our part," Caferro said. "We lost an opportunity there."

Vern Wright, pastor at the Plymouth Congregational Church in Helena, spoke Wednesday in favor of expanding CHIP, saying the lack of health coverage for millions of children is a "deep moral crisis" for the country.

Churches and charities can help the poor in their local communities, but their help is a mere "drop in the bucket" compared to what programs like CHIP can do, he said.